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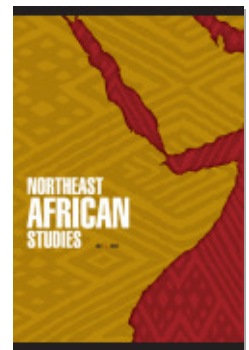
Modernity: Its Title to Uniqueness and its Advent in
Ethiopia: From the Lecture *What Is “Zemenawinet”?*:
Perspectives on Ethiopian Modernity

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Northeast African Studies, Volume 13, Number 1, 2013 (New Series), pp.
1-17 (Article)

Published by Michigan State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nas.2013.0004>



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Modernity: Its Title to Uniqueness and its Advent in Ethiopia

From the Lecture *What Is “Zemenawinet”?:
Perspectives on Ethiopian Modernity*

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1.

There have been varied, truly impressive attempts by towering talents—among them Hegel, Marx, Weber—to establish that modernity was born in the right place at the right time. Success or failure, this exercise itself manifests a conspicuous mark of modernity: historical self-consciousness or a capacity to step back from our own time and to compare it with others. That said, the claim stated at the start is highly controversial. Though there is considerable convergence on birthplace—the West—there is little agreement on the birthdate of modernity. The dispute over the advent of modernity is bound up with competing claims about the conditions decisive in the making of modernity: the ascetic spirit of puritan Protestantism, free labor, the rise of towns, modern science, and new opportunities for trade, industrial manufacture, and varied new technologies. I doubt that either the

key originating elements can be definitively singled out or the when and where of its appearance be fixed with finality.

It may well be that the quest for the advent of modernity is a category mistake, as G. M. Trevelyan suggests: “Unlike dates, periods are not facts. They are retrospective conceptions that we form about past events, useful to focus discussion, but very often leading historical thought astray.”¹ More importantly, rival claims about the advent of modernity rest on conceptions of human history that cannot be sustained. I do not believe that there is an overarching rational explanation of human progress. Perhaps the most developed theory of this kind is that offered by Marx and intricately developed by the late Jerry Cohen. Roughly, Marx proposes first, that there is throughout history a necessity to improve the technical forces of production, and second, social forms undergo change so that arrangements hospitable to technological improvement always prevail. The attempt to account for all social change as driven by the necessity to march in step with technological innovation seems implausible, not least because it involves the glaring anachronism of projecting peculiar features of the modern world onto the entire past.

Still, the historical self-consciousness of modernity noted earlier, as well as a sense of its uniqueness, can exist in the absence of any commitment to grand narratives about the course of human history. Consider, for instance, Virginia Woolf’s astonishing observation occasioned by the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition:

On or about December 1910 human nature changed. All human relations shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature.²

Note the striking similarity between this pronouncement and the famous description of the modern age in *The Communist Manifesto*:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty, and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed fast-frozen relations with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new formed ones become antiquated before they can

ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind.³

It is of little importance that Marx's remarks were made in the middle of the nineteenth century and Virginia Woolf's in the first decade of the twentieth century. After all, it was after the Second World War that the salient features of the modern world that we identified are fully realized in the European corner of the world they inhabit. As Perry Anderson points out:

After 1945, the semi-aristocratic or agrarian order and its appurtenances was finished in every country. Bourgeois democracy was finally universalized. With that, certain critical links with a pre-capitalist past were snapped. Mass production and consumption transformed Western Europe along American lines.⁴

Both Karl Marx and Virginia Woolf capture defining features of the modern age well before it became entrenched in practice.

Leaving aside worries about the emergence of modernity and its causes, we can arrive at rich characterizations of modernity that people with different historical and ethical perspectives can accept. A special feature and self-image is that modernity is the end, not of course chronologically, but—in the Hegelian sense—categorically of history defined as the realization of human freedom. It is in this respect that modernity is a vindication of the values of the Enlightenment, and more directly of the ideals of the French Revolution: liberty, equality, and fraternity. Modernity, thus, marks the decline or end of religious and traditional authority, including the authority of the past. Nietzsche's declaration that God is dead or what Weber famously called "the disenchantment of the world," or Marx "the holy profaned," and is nowadays named "secularization," is a defining mark of modernity. An important consequence is that modern government or the exercise of coercive power in modern society calls for legitimization. The disenchantment of the modern age has other wide ramifications. The modern world manifests a break with religious authority and, with that, the acceptance of religious toleration. Even though its pedigree can be traced to religious toleration, modern toleration extends far beyond matters of faith to encompass secular conceptions of personal and public good or fundamen-

tal beliefs about the meaning of life. Political toleration in modernity is a generalization of principles of religious tolerance of rival personal and collective conceptions of the good life. Thus, we can say, following John Stuart Mill and Isaiah Berlin, that pluralism is a deep fact of modernity. As John Rawls puts it:

The diversity of religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines found in modern democratic societies is not a mere historical condition that may soon pass away; it is a permanent feature of the public culture of democracy.⁵

The fact that there cannot or should not be a shared conception of the good or the meaning of life in the modern world means, for one thing, that personal and public life cannot be of a piece. Indeed, rivalry over the good or the meaning of life dictates a division between the private and public domain. The nature of the two domains and their relationship is a central concern of modernity. For instance, the modern value of autonomy is upheld both to protect the individual from public demands and interferences, as well as to realize the individual's choice and experimentation among diverse forms of life. The private-public distinction has enabled the cultivation and refinement of the personal, the eccentric, the intimate and personal relationships, a matter to which art forms—say, the novel—and certain styles of art minister. The shift in comparative importance between the private and the public is a subject of complicated debate and negotiation. Diversity or pluralism in modern life means that matters of ultimate value do not centrally figure in public life and political agenda. Instead, they chiefly thrive in the private life of individuals and in free associations of individuals. On the other hand, ethical questions previously left to individuals to settle on their own are now matters of public concern and decision; for instance, questions about who is to live or die. But given pluralism, the justifying grounds on which public morality and public institutions resolve ethical questions necessarily tend to be procedural, including practices of rational conversation and persuasion. The pluralism of modern life may well mean that justice is the first, indeed, the only good of society. I will come back to the ethical consequences of disenchantment.

Let me stress that the thesis that the modern age sees itself as unique because, for the first time, the possibilities of human freedom are realized,

is shared by otherwise rival ethical and political outlooks. Modernity, in the sense of the end of history, is endorsed by Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Weber. Hegel's is, of course, the formative account of the thesis, a thesis that became popular through Kojève. Of late, the thesis has been adopted by countless liberals such as Fukuyama to support a triumphant reading of the conclusion of the Cold War in favor of the West.

To profess the end of history is not, of course, to welcome the end. For instance, though Weber was convinced that the modern age is terminally disenchanted, he was disquieted by the consequent sovereignty of instrumental reason in practical life. In Marx, too, there is a clear verdict that the public forms of the modern world realize all the possibilities of freedom. In his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, what he has to say about democracy is representative:

Democracy is the resolved mystery of all constitutions. Here the constitution is returned to its real ground actual man, the actual people and established as its own work. The constitution appears as what it is, the free product of men.⁶

Marx is saying that there can be no better title to legitimate rule than self-government. Yet, Marx of course saw, perhaps better than anyone, the ills of capitalism and bourgeois democracy. Still, he was confident that capitalism would itself yield the means and agents capable of overcoming its own disabilities. Hence, modernity is unique because it either represents the full realization of freedom, or because it furnishes all the conditions necessary for the achievement of freedom. The political values of modernity—democracy, liberty, equality, material betterment—are secular and cosmopolitan in scope. The public ideals realized in the modern age are ideals for all human beings. In that sense, fraternity is a central idea of modernity.

The ethically lofty characterization that I am offering with respect to modernity's uniqueness is not meant to suggest that the actual emergence of modernity was benign. The rise of capitalism involved war, conquest, slavery, exploitation, ethnic cleansing, and the like. Indeed, some have argued that modern ideals and practices may themselves encourage certain sorts of crimes. For instance, it is suggested that genocide and ethnic cleansing are among the risks of early democracy, because under democ-

racy the bounds of citizenship and sovereignty coincide. Similarly, the decline in the modern world of social hierarchy based on customary, religious, or traditional belief may have fostered pseudoscientific, biological views of racial superiority.

Despite this dark record, it is undeniable that modernity provides the possibility of shared values, aims, and bonds among all human beings and peoples, and hence, the modern form of solidarity that I call fraternity. Indeed, it is striking that it is only in the modern age that we are all contemporaries. Modernity is the era where humanity shares a common destiny. I cannot possibly show this here, but let me illustrate it with a few examples.

Consider the first premodern people to be studied by anthropologists—scholars that were beginning to see themselves as scientific ethnographers—were colonial subjects engaged in commercial agriculture and trade. Malinowski, a pioneer ethnographer, says:

The empirical factors which the ethnographer has before him in the Trobriands nowadays are not natives unaffected by European influences but natives to a considerable extent transformed by the influences.⁷

He proposes something he dubbed “the anthropology of the changing native.” “Changing,” I assume, under the sway of modernity. It is also perhaps worth noting that the discipline of sociology arose from the conviction of the uniqueness of the modern world and its pervasive reach.

My second example of how in the modern age we are all contemporaries concerns Haiti. Many, including Susan Buck-Morss, have noted that the Haitian revolution abolishing slavery at the turn of the nineteenth century was a black French revolution.⁸ Closer to home, self-conscious resistance to imperialism is evident at the Battle of Adwa, nearly a century after the Haitian revolution. The victory at Adwa consolidated the sovereignty of the modern Ethiopian nation-state. It is noteworthy that political unification of the German nation was completed only in 1871, just 25 years before Adwa; and Ethiopia’s adversary at Adwa, Italy, was born in 1870, one year before. Again, in the second encounter with Italy, it is no exaggeration to say that Ethiopians were the first to resist fascism. The initial European reaction to the fascist invasion was appeasement of Italy’s impe-

rial ambitions. Mao Ze Dong speaks of the novelty of the guerilla struggle waged by the patriots. Finally, in the 1960s, Ethiopian students and women championed causes akin to those of their western counterparts about the same time and in the same spirit. Hence, modernity belongs to everyone: modernity is not just a shared destination, it is a shared destiny, and a shared public culture.

Even though I have not embraced the theories of history mounted to underwrite modernity, I have gone along with the ambitious conclusion of these theories: the conception of modernity as a realization of human freedom. Is the modern age, then, to be credited with unqualified human progress? Unfortunately, as we all know all too well, modernity has a dark underside. Let me briskly say a few words on the dark side of modernity. First, paradoxically the dark side is connected to a shining dimension of modernity, a dazzling movement of the arts called modernism that flourished in Europe from about 1890 to 1930. Modernism's insistent call for the destruction of the bourgeois world to make space for a new one found resonance in Fascism and Nazism. Roger Smith in a book titled *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning in Mussolini and Hitler* explores the entanglements between modernism and the ideology of National Socialism.⁹ The fact that these ideologies had champions among leading figures of modernism is well known: T. S. Eliot's anti-Semitism and Ezra Pound's allegiance to Fascism are infamous examples. The war crimes committed by national socialist regimes deployed the modern state, modern propaganda, a modern bureaucracy, a modern army, and modern weapons. Thus, evil was done by distinctively modern means and institutions. The Holocaust, Hiroshima, and other grave evils of the twentieth century demonstrate that moral progress is radically reversible. Central to these evils is racism; blindness to the souls of others. Accordingly, they manifest a deep failure in fraternity. Put differently, they also show the ethical depth of fraternity, for in its absence, liberty and equality have little or no weight. After the Holocaust, one philosopher said that humanity as a species does not have a moral title to survive. His suggestion is that if human beings were to disappear, this would not be a tragedy over and above the tragic loss of individual human lives. This may sound extreme, but it is an understandable reaction to the fact that modern humanity freely and zealously chose to do away with innocent lives on the grounds that some human lives have no worth. Genocide has been committed since, not only in Europe, but

also in Asia and in Africa, including Ethiopia. So we must admit that moral progress can suddenly lapse. The descent into barbarism can never be ruled out.

What I said about the dark side of modernity shows that modernity and its champions can be shown to be innocent of the common charge of utopian or millennial hope. All the same, it may still be possible to speak of moral progress. No one now can reasonably deny that, say, slavery or taking innocent life is wrong. What no one may reasonably seek to reverse may well be a credible criterion of human progress. Regrettably, we cannot thereby count on the fact that no one will ever again be enslaved or the innocent slaughtered. Theory and theoretical assent may not contribute to progress. In saying this, I join Hegel and Marx. In the preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel holds that philosophy cannot make a contribution to history. The owl of Minerva, a symbol of wisdom, flies in the dusk, when the day's work is over. For Marx, despite the *Eleven Theses on Feurbach*, the ideal society is a society in which men can appreciate the significance of their actions and the actions of others without the benefit of theory. Transparency in human relations is a public ideal for Hegel and Marx alike.

Let me conclude with tentative gestures on new directions for moral progress in the modern world. To get clear on the nature and arena of moral advance, it is helpful to recall the public consequence of disenchantment, provided that disenchantment is here to stay, a possibility that is beginning to look improbable with widespread religious revival in every salvationist faith both in the West and the rest of the world. The persistence of diversity in modern public life means that when it comes to robust conceptions of the good life—say, the quest for knowledge or beauty—individuals and free associations may have stronger ties to people and communities outside their own. Given pluralism, the distinctness of modern political communities may not mark internal ethical cohesion within political communities or among them. Increased economic and political interdependence, together with rapid advances in communication, indicate that the fate of the earth and the well-being of peoples may depend on actions, actors, and structures beyond the bounds of the nation-state.

Still, the nation-state is not entirely ethically irrelevant. It can still coerce its own citizens; and, if powerful, it can do away with other states and peoples. Hence, the importance of placing firm ethical bounds on the internal sovereignty of the nation-state as well as on its title to international

action. To meet the more positive demands of justice, we need to look at political society as well as the society of peoples and states beyond it. Liberals and socialists agree that justice in the modern world is essentially a matter of equality. Equality in political freedom is not often challenged, although securing equal worth of the right to vote or to run for office is far from assured, even in mature democracies. For instance, the U.S. Supreme Court recently granted corporations the right to spend unlimited funds on political candidates in any political election. This undermines the right of citizens to an equal say on decisions on political offices or choices of public policies. The decision will also bear on fairness in international practice, where corporations are major actors. Beyond vast differences in wealth and power, there are differences in natural assets that get in the way of equality. Some are highly gifted with beauty, charm, intellectual or physical talent, assets resistant to easy redistribution while making the lives of those thus favored by nature go well. Nonetheless, what is produced by deploying these or other natural and social assets can be redistributed.

Moreover, we all believe in the dignity or intrinsic value of human life and in the ethical equality of human lives, or that no one's life can inherently matter more than anyone else's life. Moreover, with pluralism, there are no projects of intrinsic value such that their pursuit overrides human claims to equality. The dignity and equality of human life is therefore a deep moral fact of modern life. Accordingly, the vast inequalities in life prospects within and across societies in a modern world of opulence are an affront to ethical decency. Those who enjoy a disproportionately large share of the means of a worthwhile life risk making the earth uninhabitable for future generations. Second, they now deprive the poor within their societies and around the world the opportunity to lead meaningful lives. How could a few deserve to live so well at the expense of the disadvantaged multitude and countless future generations? With Jerry Cohen, we can ask: If you are an egalitarian, how come you are so rich? Given the presumption of equality, to be deserving, the rich must show us that with less inequality the poor would fare even worse. It is impossible to believe that a more egalitarian domestic and global arrangement would result in even greater suffering for the poor. But, if that is correct, those better off have to retreat either to the brute claim "it is ours," or that they have the might to see that it remains theirs. These are not ethically reasonable or attractive options. A world closer to equality, beyond serving

justice and warding off social evil arising from inequality, would shield us from regress into public evil by extending the reach of fraternity.

2.

The anticapitalist protests recently held in the financial centers of New York City and London, among other sites, are a welcome counterpoint to the triumphalist spirit that appeared to have overtaken the West since the end of the Cold War. The triumphalist posture finds expression in a widely shared sense that fundamental debate on how best to arrange public life—political or economic—has finally come to an end. Most everyone now seems resigned to the inescapability of some form of liberal capitalism as mankind's ultimate public fate.

Against this backdrop, the anticapitalist protests, like the Arab uprisings, by which they were in part inspired, caught the world completely by surprise. Even then, it took some time before the protests attracted the attention of either the press or of public officials. The neglect was no doubt encouraged by the fact that the anticapitalist protests were orderly, peaceful, and entirely unencumbered by a leadership, an organization, an ideology, or even designated spokespersons or demands, a dazzling departure from traditional anticapitalist public action—trade unionist or leftist.

Beyond its evident novelty, the anticapitalist protest is welcome because capitalism's singular triumph is, as Jerry Cohen once suggested, largely a matter of what is sometimes called adaptive preference formation: We tend to tailor our choices and values to fit the world. A given option is deemed the only or the best course just because it is available. (Conversely, as in the fable of the fox and the grapes, something is devalued or undervalued just because it is not within reach.) Though irrational, adaptive preference formation can be tenacious. Even though the Western economic system is clearly in the grip of a grave crisis from which no one has managed to chart a clear course of escape, there is nowhere a noticeable turn away from capitalism itself. What Thomas Kuhn said about what he calls normal science to characterize a ruling scientific theory holds here: when confronted by recalcitrant crises, the community of believers remains faithful to the beleaguered theory until a viable alternative is found.

What is arresting about the anticapitalist protests is that deep doubts about capitalism itself are now vividly visible in the citadels of capitalism.

In voicing protest, critical and impassioned citizens of mature capitalist democracies seem to be joining in solidarity with spatially distant victims of capitalism inhabiting impoverished parts of the world. Noting the endless testimonials on the web by the many Mohamed Bouazizs (the Tunisian vendor whose self-immolation sparked the Arab uprisings) of the United States, an American observer commented: “The protesters in Zuccotti Park seem to have heralded the membership of a significant portion of our population in a new form of Third World.”¹⁰ My immediate motive for invoking the anticapitalist protests here is to indicate that there may yet be reason to resist the widespread temptation to declare the death of socialism, a leading public ideal of modernity embraced by the Ethiopian Student Movement.

A deeper motive is movingly captured by the Nobel laureate, Harold Pinter, who says:

There exists today widespread propaganda which asserts that socialism is dead. But if to be a socialist is to be a person convinced that the words “the common good” and “social justice” actually mean something; if to be a socialist is to be outraged at the contempt in which millions and millions of people are held by those in power, by “market forces,” by international financial institutions; if to be a socialist is to be a person determined to do everything in his or her power to alleviate these unforgivably degraded lives, then socialism can never be dead because these aspirations never die.¹¹

Though I am certain that there is no single explanation for the rise of modernity anywhere, I shall now propose that the Ethiopian Student Movement was a midwife of Ethiopian modernity. Before I spell out the claim, let me enter a few caveats, caveats registered earlier on modernity’s uniqueness. First, I had suggested that contested accounts of the historical causes of modernity and disputes over its defining features make it difficult to fix modernity’s birthdate or birthplace with finality. Second, I had suggested that with modernity we are all at once contemporaries. For instance, I mentioned that Malinowski, a pioneer practitioner of the science, said that the first natives or premodern peoples to be studied by anthropology were leading lives that were subject to the influence of the modern world. Indeed, through exploration, trade, and conquest virtually all peo-

ples and places were drawn into the orbit of modernity. Third, even if we agree on the cluster of characteristics constituting modernity, there is a crucial distinction between the advent of the idea of modernity on the one hand, and its psychological and institutional realization on the other. To highlight the distinction, let me cite three recent theses about the origin of modernity. In a book titled: *The Rise and Fall of Alexandria: Birthplace of the Modern World*, Justin Pollard and Howard Reid argue that the mental or intellectual furniture of modernity had been cobbled together already in Alexandria before the city's loss of its celebrated library.¹² In support they offer: the rich mathematical knowledge of Euclid and Archimedes; atomism and heliocentrism in physical theory; and radical secularism in respect to the meaning of life. The second is Stephen Greenblatt's *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*.¹³ According to Greenblatt, a key to how the world became modern can be found in the rediscovery of Lucretius in the Renaissance, and in the way that Lucretius's naturalist, humanist philosophical vision deeply shaped the natural and human sciences that gave birth to modernity. Third, recall Perry Anderson's judgment that a clean break with a premodern past and a full realization of modernity was achieved in Europe only in the wake of World War II, when ruling dynasties were succeeded by bourgeois democracies, Fordism entered production, and a consumerist culture started to spread in the wider society.

In Ethiopia, too, it would not be surprising if leading ideas of modernity were to be convincingly traced to some distant visionary sage, say a Zarayaccob, or to an early radical sect such as the Dekike Stephanos. There is also little doubt that ideas of modernity were sharply articulated and forcefully advocated by the likes of Gebrehiwet Baykedagn in the illustrious generation that Bahru Zewde dubs the early modernizers. Moreover, Ethiopia's leaders, at least since Tewodros, manifest evident self-consciousness in regards to modernity's promises and perils. They were resolved to introduce modern systems of administration and to harness modern technology both to defend Ethiopia's independence and to deploy her rich human and material resources effectively.

Still, I maintain it is with the Ethiopian Student Movement that all essential elements of modernity—popular legitimate rule by free and equal citizens, the abolition of all privileges of birth or inherited position, equality of faiths and cultural communities, industrialization, and secularism—were championed and advocated together in the name of socialism.

Why did the Ethiopian Student Movement urge a transition to modernity under the aegis of socialism? The aim of the Student Movement was not merely to win intellectual adherence to the ideas and ideals of modernity. Nor was there an intention to persuade a favored prince or an elite that modernity offered a worthy practical vision for Ethiopia. Instead, the quest of the Student Movement was the urgent, practical realization of its ambitious agenda by a mobilized citizenry. Socialism was championed because it would serve the aspiration to bring about modernity by revolutionary means.

Hannah Arendt once suggested that it is only natural that a revolution is predetermined or shaped by the kind of regime it targets. The allure of socialism would prove easier to appreciate if we take notice of what was special, say, in contrast to colonial Africa, in what Ethiopia was up against. Gaining entry into the modern world posed peculiar problems for Ethiopia, problems that did not readily arise in the rest of Africa. Although colonial rule had exploited cultural diversity and authority to white supremacist advantage, its overriding mission was to abolish African traditions, institutions, and identities. In contrast, the limited foothold of modern institutions in imperial Ethiopia served not to supplant, but rather to strengthen the relics of a premodern past. An absolutist crown, an established religion, an official language, and privileged public culture became constitutionally entrenched, institutionally bolstered by a standing army and a bureaucracy and their claim to legitimacy cultivated and instilled through modern schools and media. For most of Africa, as seen in the ruling ideologies of the time such as *Négritude*, liberation could be seen as becoming free from what is unmistakably alien and affirming what was deemed truly one's own. For Ethiopia, emancipation was a rather different matter of going against the grain, calling for a clean break from a political landscape and a public culture that deeply defined our collective self-identity. Socialism provided a powerful weapon for exorcising our received self-image, thereby enabling a decisive defiance of absolutist public authority as well as the debilitating claims of inherited class and cultural privilege.

Moreover, socialism's appeal importantly turned on its reach beyond political freedom. Nkrumah's "seek ye first the political kingdom," though a fitting slogan for the anti-colonial straggle, could not meaningfully address the plight of the countless victims of those enjoying the privilege of birth and inherited position in Ethiopia. By championing the many socially

marginalized and economically exploited, socialism promised not just popular sovereignty but also social justice. To bring down the premodern pillars of empire was also to free and empower the multitude of despised, disenfranchised, and dispossessed. Upholding the cosmopolitan ideals of socialism, thus, afforded a sense of allegiance and belonging to the Ethiopian populace. Accordingly, there was then a rare, happy harmony between universalist ethical demands and particularist attachments. Ethiopian socialists could reasonably feel the nationalist pride manifested by Cubans in their revolution or by the Vietnamese in their triumphant wars of resistance waged against Western imperialism.

Lest you think that I am tendentiously singling out the Student Movement to cast in the honorific role of midwife of Ethiopian modernity, let me conclude with brisk remarks, first, about the disasters to which we were exposed by the Student Movement and, second, about another possible candidate for the station of midwifery.

Despite its evident attractions and its limited success in paving Ethiopia's release from a premodern past, the commitment to socialism harbored varied costly illusions, illusions that are a legacy of scientific socialism or the view that the ethical ideals of socialism such as freedom, equality, and fraternity are bound to be honored in practice, provided we march in step with history. One illusion is that questions of political justice can be sidestepped if pride of place in policy and practice is accorded to the disenfranchised and dispossessed. However, after so many demonstrations of painful failure, it is now plain that there is no reason to suppose that a regime avowedly championing the poor and powerless while enjoying their support can be counted upon to respect the dignity of equal and free citizens. Indeed, the socialist cause was usurped in Ethiopia by the military to seize state power and to consolidate a tyranny that trampled on the rights and freedoms of citizens with mindless brutality. The military regime followed in the footsteps of the populist tyrannies of the twentieth century, a few notoriously installed into political office by winning in competitive democratic elections.

A second illusion was that a few critical measures—among them, nationalization and state control of economic allocation and distribution—would yield economic growth and justice. How could peasants be expected to overcome poverty just because they are freed from obligations to landlords? Just how could their meager resources and their primitive

technology spontaneously create the wealth necessary to launch an industrial economy? Neither freedom from hunger and poverty nor the turn to industry was accomplished. To the contrary, farmers became subject to obligations to the state more onerous than those previously exacted by landlords. Moreover, the military regime was determined on killing its political opponents and on waging genocidal campaigns against movements rising in dissent and revolt. Peasants were forcibly recruited to fight in the protracted wars mounted by government against its own citizens and communities.

The illusion that political and economic justice would prevail once precedence is given to the disadvantaged many and their interests is a voluntarist shadow of scientific socialism's materialist optimism.

Roughly, the idea is that in a precapitalist setting a revolutionary regime can jump start an industrial economy as well as speed the emergence and ascendance of the working class through control of the productive resources of society and the mobilization of the laboring and neglected majority. Thus, over time, it can join in scientific socialism's faith, whereby material abundance achieved by a large, organized working class under advanced industrial production leads to a society where equality triumphs. The envisaged inevitability of public virtue invites a complacent, quiescent attitude to ethical reflection and political deliberation, as well as to public organization and action. Such quiescence makes the public vulnerable to modern barbarians bent on dominance, as well as hostage to the vagaries of nature and economic fortune. It is ironic that the theory disarms the very subjects it aims to deliver from dependence, destitution, and injustice.

To be disabused of these and related illusions fostered by scientific socialism comes to taking two brute facts of society seriously: namely, coercion and scarcity. As long as our collective life requires resorting to coercion, there is no acceptable alternative to institutional arrangements that respect the freedom and equality of citizens. Put differently, on no account must we indulge the folly of faith in the elect person or body that can be entrusted with unrestrained command over the coercive powers of the state just because the authority is thought to reliably guide us or the favored agents of revolution to some earthly paradise that history had ordained.

No worthwhile public aims, including the ideals of socialism, can ever justify a sacrifice of democratic values and practices. The persistence of

scarcity, in turn, imposes an obligation of justice to minimize the limits material scarcity places on the pursuit of meaningful lives for members of our community and for future generations. Together with discharge of this obligation, justice also demands that we seek the equality of citizens in respect to the ability to enjoy the means necessary for leading a meaningful life—the ethical aspiration that animates the anticapitalist protests.

Finally, though unhappily I cannot discuss it now, let me end by pointing to another candidate for the title of midwife of Ethiopian modernity. I have in mind the brief but brilliant modernism that blossomed in the arts roughly coincident with the heyday of the Student Movement. To cite only a few of the leading figures: Skunder Boghossian and Gebrekristos Desta in painting; the poetry of, again, Gebrekristos, Mengistu Lemma, Solomon Deressa, and Yohannes Admassu; the stories and novels of Sebbat Gebregziabher and Dagnachew Worku, among many others; the work of Tsegaye Gebremedhin and Abate Mekuria in drama; the journalism of Gedamu Abraham and Solomon Deressa.

The modernists turned away from the lofty and the representational to look anew at the everyday, the ordinary, and the marginalized in ways that both self-consciously explore the possibilities of their chosen art form and bear the signature of the artist's individual style. Unfortunately, there was little interplay between the modernity of the Student Movement and the modernism of the new generation of artists except on rare public occasions such as the poetry recitals on College Day and the mediacy of exceptional individuals like Yohannes Admasu, who belonged to both the world of beauty and the world of action. Nonetheless the sensibility of modernism vividly exemplified essential virtues of modernity: individuality, freedom, bold exploration of novel possibilities, and a robust worldliness. Even though it may not have prompted change in the institutions and practices of the practical world, Ethiopian modernism furnished a powerful expression of the ethos of modernity. This ethos matters, for without a spirited culture, modernity, as many had feared, is liable to lack enchantment, life, and substance, extending to most little more than the transient and uniform satisfactions savored in a consumer society.

NOTES

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